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## Introduction

The study of relationships has always been a part of the study of human development. The obviousness of the importance of relationships makes discussions of the subject seem trite. At the thought of introducing this topic for discussion among a group of psychologists, I can almost imagine the yawns, the roll of the eyes and the “yes, yes, of course relationships are important,” as if to say surely we can move on and talk about something we all do not already know. But has developmental psychology fully grappled with the fact that we are born out of and into relationship with others? What does relationship mean?

Many developmental theorists have written about the importance of relationships in human development. Conceptions of the self as inherently social, and ways of understanding the interplay between self and society, can be found in the work of early theorists such as Baldwin (1913) and Mead (1934), and that of numerous psychologists throughout this century (e.g., Ferenczi, 1933; Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1960). However, it has only been over the past 30 years, against the backdrop of the women’s movement in the United States, that a distinct relational view of psychological development has begun to take shape. Reframing psychological development as a relational process, these new theories have developed within feminist psychology (e.g., Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1976), psychoanalysis (e.g., Mitchell, 1988; Stolorow, Brandshaft, & Atwood, 1987), and research on infant development (e.g., Stern, 1986; Tronick, 1989; Trevarthen, 1979). They share the foundational idea that self and relationship, rather than representing two poles of a continuum, or separate and distinct psychological experiences, are inextricable and therefore incomprehensible when one is viewed in isolation from the other. Taken together, these relational theories represent a paradigm shift<sup>1</sup> within psychology from a view of the human condition as one of separation and an accompanying understanding of healthy psychological development as a progression toward increasing self-differentiation, autonomy and independence (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Freud, 1930; Kohlberg, 1981; Mahler, Pine, & Berman, 1975), to one which assumes that we are fundamentally relational and that our psychological development necessarily occurs in and through continuous engagement and mutual participation in relationships with others.

As Kuhn’s (1962/1970) articulation of how a paradigm shift occurs would suggest,<sup>2</sup> each of these

groups of theorists responded to their observation of anomalies in their research and clinical work by questioning the dominant paradigm of separation in psychology and developing an alternative relational view. Though they have developed their thinking by focusing on different aspects of developmental psychology—the feminists on the inclusion of girls and women in psychological theory and research, the relational psychoanalysts on the experiences of adult men and women in therapy, and the infant researchers on relationships between infants and their mothers—they make more general claims about the human condition and share two basic assumptions: (1) we are born with an innate capacity for, and desire to engage in, relationships with others and (2) an increasing capacity for significant and meaningful connection with others is the primary marker of psychological development and is critical to the development of what is commonly referred to as a sense of self (Aiken & Trevarthen, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Mitchell, 1988). Linking psychological health and vitality with growth in and through relationships with others, the identification and exploration of the primary relational processes through which psychological development occurs are central to each of these lines of inquiry.

In this paper, I identify the basic concepts of relational psychology as outlined within infancy research, feminist psychology, and relational psychoanalysis and examine places where these theories converge and where they diverge. Then, as a way to illustrate how relational theory shifts our understanding of psychological development, I turn to the research on risk and resilience which has found one “supportive” relationship with an adult to provide significant psychological protection for adolescents. I argue that viewing this evidence from a relational perspective, rather than from within a paradigm of separation, offers new insight into understanding *how* supportive relationships with adults provide psychological protection for adolescents. In particular, I suggest that these relationships are protective, not so much because they provide something special or unique, but because they provide adolescents with a basic relational context that is necessary for healthy psychological development to occur. As such, focused study of these relationships may offer us not only long-needed explanations of this empirical evidence, but may also offer us a window into a deeper understanding of how psychological development itself occurs.

At the heart of relational theory, and the evidence about the protective nature of relationships with

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adults for adolescents, lie basic questions about what relationship means. Being in some form of relationship with others is an inevitable part of the human condition. Starting from this premise, understanding the influence that the nature of our relationships has on our individual and collective or cultural development becomes a central question for the study of human development. Common sense tells us that we develop within relationships with others and that who these relationships are with, the quality of them, what occurs and does not occur and what is said and not said within them, the forces which impinge on them, and the contexts within which they take shape must influence our development. But how? This question, a key challenge for developmental psychology, is a central question in relational psychologies and is the focus of my inquiry here.

## Review of Relational Theories

### **In the Beginning, There is Both Self and Relationship: The Infancy Research**

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, some researchers began to suspect that we may actually be born with cognitive and interpersonal abilities then assumed to develop over the first few years of life (e.g., Bruner, 1969). Shifting from the practice of observing infants by themselves, these researchers began to observe infant behavior within a relational context. Focusing on moment by moment observations of the interactions between mothers and infants, researchers have now documented that infants are born with both a motive to know and engage with the physical world, conceptualized as subjectivity or a sense of self, and a motive to communicate with persons, which has been called intersubjectivity (Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Trevarthen, 1980, 1998).

These findings represent a shift from the view that the cognitive ability to differentiate ourselves from others has to develop over the first year of life and that the attainment of this ability is required before true communication can occur. In this view, infants' interactive behaviors in the early months of life are believed to be essentially reflexive as they occur before the infant has developed the cognitive capacity necessary for self-differentiation (Shaffer, 1984; Spitz, 1963; Sroufe, 1979).

Increasingly, it is understood that we are in fact born with a host of complex communicative abilities which we utilize to engage with our caregivers from the earliest moments of life (Trevarthen, 1980; Beebe & Lachmann, 1994).

Infants are born with a well-differentiated

affective system (Weinberg & Tronick, 1994), the cognitive ability to differentiate themselves from the world and to distinguish things from persons (Trevarthen, 1979), and the capacity to play an active role in the regulation of their interactions with others (Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Trevarthen, 1980). It is also thought that infants have the cognitive ability for representation at birth and that they use it to represent early social interactions (Beebe, 1986; Stern, 1985).

Tronick (Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, & Brazelton, 1978; Weinberg & Tronick, 1996) has examined the impact of a mother interrupting face-to-face play with her baby by holding her face still and not responding to her child for two minutes. During this still-face condition, infants make repeated efforts to elicit a response from their mothers, showing surprise and sometimes distress at her lack of response. When the mother does reengage, the quality of the play remains below that of the play that preceded the still-face. This continued disruption indicates that the infants are not simply reacting on a moment to moment basis, but rather that these events have a lingering influence, suggesting they may be represented internally (Tronick, 1989).

Murray and Trevarthen (1985) have shown that even infants between six and twelve weeks of age display distress and attempt to reengage their mothers during a still-face condition. Comparing infants' responses in the still-face condition to those when they are presented alternately with live images and videotaped replays of their mothers, differences were noted in the infants' responses. While the infants attempted to reengage the mothers when they were still-faced, they did not make these attempts during the video replays. Rather, they displayed expressions of confusion and puzzlement and tended to look away from their mothers' images when it became clear there was no association between their behaviors and the responses of their mothers.

Both the mothers and their infants are responding to the communicative cues of their partner. This bidirectional nature of mother-infant communication has been documented through the use of time-series analyses (Cohn & Tronick, 1987; Tronick & Cohn, 1989). This research has shown that in interactions between infants as young as three months and their mothers, both the infants and the mothers respond to the behavior of their partner by adjusting their own behavior. That is, the infant's behavior can be predicted on the basis of the mother's behavior and vice versa (Beebe, Lachmann, & Jaffe, 1997).

Central to the theoretical models which have been developed on the basis of this empirical evidence, is an